

The Morality Meme: Nietzsche and *A Serious Man*

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Abstract. Pairing together the Coen brothers film *A Serious Man* (2009) with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, this paper looks at questions about morality, illusion, and the influence of Jewish thought on contemporary ethics. Beginning with a reading of Nietzsche that locates his discussion of the Jews within its proper historical context, it traces the beginnings of the “morality meme,” the notion of a universal moral reward that, Nietzsche argues, arises during the Deuteronomic period of Jewish history. The second part of the paper looks at how *A Serious Man* also engages in an interrogation of this moralistic overcoding of the universe, with a particular emphasis on how these questions upset Larry Gopnik’s views of both science and religion. The essay then concludes with a look at the poisonous effects of the “morality meme,” showing in particular how it has influenced the psychology of anti-Semitism. Rather than a rejection of Jewishness, the paper concludes that in *A Serious Man* the Coen brothers engage in a careful but loving criticism of their own culture that requires them to distance themselves from the problematic effects of its religious morality.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Coen Brothers, *A Serious Man*, Morality, Jewishness.

This essay sets out to interpret the Coen brothers film *A Serious Man* (2009) through the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche on the premise that their works converge in the shared task of engaging, through the prism of Jewish identity, in a poignant interrogation of the destructive illusions that so often plague humanity. In earlier films like *Miller’s Crossing* (1990) and *Barton Fink* (1991), Joel and Ethan Coen have tended to treat the topic of Jewishness from the perspective of its rejection by American society, with the Jews in these films clear outsiders to the society in which they operate. *A Serious Man*, by contrast, has a different feel to it because, even though anti-Semitism does occasionally rear its ugly head in the course of the story, the film’s protagonist, Larry Gopnik, lives in a cultural context that consists predominantly of other Jews. Given how closely the film’s setting resembles the Coens’ own upbringing, *A Serious Man* can be read as an incisive interrogation by the brothers of their own Jewish background, an unflinching critique that seeks to address some difficult truths at the same time as maintaining an

obvious pride in their own cultural origins. The film is not a renunciation by the Coens of their Jewishness, but rather an attempt to find a point of reconciliation with it that does not sacrifice the intellectual honesty of their secular outlook.

Nietzsche's relationship to Jewish culture has a different but equally complicated history. The taint of anti-Semitism unfairly attached to his name by the Nazis has slowly abated over the past century, thanks to the work begun by Georges Bataille in "Nietzsche and the Fascists" (1936) and consolidated by his translator and biographer Walter Kaufmann in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1950). The matter of ascertaining his position on the Jews remains a difficult one for many readers of Nietzsche's work, however, due to the strong rhetoric and ambiguous terms he employs in his texts. Nietzsche repeatedly calls Jewish thought "sickly," "decadent," and "poisonous," accusing it of harboring a deep reserve of spite and nihilism. To many readers, these characterizations seem consistent with the idea that Nietzsche is an anti-Semite. That view, however, is a misreading of Nietzsche's work, a point reiterated in such recent scholarship as Weaver Santaniello's book *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews* (1994). Nietzsche's real interest in the Jews is historical, tracing as he does the roots of modern morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *The Anti-Christ* (1888) to the psychological survival techniques that emerged during the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests of the Israelites. This ancient period, Nietzsche argues, marks the emergence of what I call the "morality meme," the idea that there is a system of divine reward and punishment that reflects humanity's faithfulness toward God. The shared rejection of this idea is the point at which Nietzsche and the Coen brothers converge, for in this peculiar distortion of reality they perceive a dishonesty that harbors illusions of the most dangerous kind. The predicament that confronts Larry Gopnik lies less in the various humiliations he experiences than in his dawning realization that the moral order he assumed was inscribed, like a physical law, into the fabric of the universe is only an illusion.

THE MORALITY MEME

While Nietzsche is only one critical window that one might use to understand the work of the Coen brothers, such an approach is hardly without precedent. He is an important point of reference in the essay

collection *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers* (2009), for instance, and Jorn K. Bramann provides an extensive (if rather questionable) reading of *Barton Fink* through the prism of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) in his book *Educating Rita and Other Philosophical Movies* (2009). The standard point of connection made by critics and reviewers alike between Nietzsche and the Coens rests on the solid perception that they possess a shared existentialist vision. This view finds its most obvious convergence in the appearance of the nihilists in *The Big Lebowski* (1998), for as readers of Nietzsche know, nihilism forms the central concern of much of his work. This paper builds on and extends this critical tradition by looking at not only the way in which Nietzsche and *A Serious Man* examine the difficulties that arise from humanity's unwillingness to confront difficult truths about reality, but also more particularly how these moral illusions spring from a mode of thinking that has specific connections to Jewish history.

From the very beginning of his career, Nietzsche was always interested in questions of truth and illusion. He explores their interaction, for instance, in his analysis of Dionysian and Apollonian trends in ancient Greek drama in *The Birth of Tragedy*, although he quickly disavows this early formulation as a romantic simplification. Nietzsche's critique of truth thus begins properly with his early unpublished essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873), in which he writes:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms (...) which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; (...) coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. We still do not know where the urge for truth comes from; for as yet we have heard only of the obligation imposed by society that it should exist: to be truthful means using the customary metaphors – in moral terms, the obligation to lie according to fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all... (46–47)

Across his writings, Nietzsche argues forcefully against the widespread assumption that humanity possesses an inherent love for the truth, that we have embraced reason and science because we have a burning desire to know the hard facts about reality. This philosophical error, he contends, emerges with Socrates (or at least, Plato's version of Socrates), who insisted that truth is the basis for moral goodness and aesthetic beauty. The ongoing influence in modernity of this false assumption is

the target of much of Nietzsche's criticism of both Enlightenment rationalism and classical liberalism. The overwhelming evidence, he points out, is that humanity has a strong preference for easy truths that do not upset its already-established prejudices. As such, humans have developed a complex series of strategies and maneuvers designed to discredit and ignore difficult truths, repeatedly preferring the comfort of illusions over the harshness of reality.

In order to provide empirical proof for these assertions, Nietzsche turns to history to seek confirmation for his ideas. This investigation occurs in his later works *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *The Anti-Christ*, both of which, in their different ways, chart the evolution of Western morality, with a particular focus on three key players: Greek and Roman philosophy, the history and religion of the Jews, and the emergence of Christianity. When reading Nietzsche's arguments, it is important to keep in mind that his field of expertise as a student and professor was classical philology, a background that gives him an in-depth knowledge of the ancient world that is crucial to understanding his critique of modernity. Whatever illusions and faults they might have possessed, he argues, the overall direction of ancient peoples – including the Israelites, early on – was one of rude, brutal health, as reflected in their gods, whose lusts and appetites signal their affirmation of life.

A crucial exception to this rule, Nietzsche argues, develops during a particular period of Jewish history. The Near East was dominated in ancient times by a succession of powerful empires: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, all of which at some point ruled over the Israelites. Even during its golden age under David and then Solomon, the nation of Israel was never more than a marginal player in the region, a point underlined not long after by the fragmentation of the tribes and the subsequent destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. Nietzsche observes that the Jewish attitude toward its position in the world bears curious little relation to the historical record of its repeated subordination:

The Jews are the most remarkable nation of world history because, faced with the question of being or not being, they preferred, with a perfectly uncanny conviction, being at any price: the price they had to pay was the radical falsification of all nature, all naturalness, all reality, the entire inner world as well as the outer. They defined themselves counter to all those conditions under which a nation was previously able to live, was permitted to live. (146)

These perennial losers of the ancient world, Nietzsche points out, cast themselves as the Chosen People in a way that differed markedly from other ancient peoples. While rival nations certainly harbored their own illusions of self-importance, the gods of these peoples at least represented a healthy projection of their own egos. Bruised by a long history of being conquered and oppressed, Nietzsche argues that the Jews, by contrast, reconceived of themselves and their religion in accordance with this underdog mindset.

Unable to build themselves up like other nations, Nietzsche observes, the Jews instead turned their subjection into a badge of honor, channeling their energy into an intense hatred of their conquerors. This psychological gambit allowed the Jews to continue affirming their status as the Chosen People while providing an explanation for their present wretchedness: the evil of conquest is recast as a divine punishment brought about by their own faults, their own lack of faithfulness toward their god. Nietzsche argues that, for its time, this move is extraordinary, as previously all gods, including those of the early Israelites, had been an affirmation of the people to whom they were attached. The Yahweh that emerges in the difficult years of conquest, by contrast, is a negative deity who repeatedly admonishes the decadence of the Jewish people.

Considered psychologically, the Jewish nation is a nation of the toughest vital energy which, placed in impossible circumstances, voluntarily, from the profoundest shrewdness in self-preservation, took the side of all *décadence* instincts – not as being dominated by them but because it divined in them a power by means of which one can prevail *against* ‘the world’. The Jews are the counterparts of *décadents*: they have been compelled to act as *décadents* to the point of illusion, they have known, with a *non plus ultra* of histrionic genius, how to place themselves at the head of all *décadence* movements (...) so as to make of them something stronger than any party *affirmative* of life [...] (147)

Nietzsche thus regards this historical turn in Jewish culture with a mixture of horror and admiration – horror, for the extent of the psychological damage that could lead an entire nation to undercut its collective ego in this way, and admiration for the brilliantly effective way that it nonetheless worked as a logic of self-preservation.

In order to implement this new way of thinking, Nietzsche argues, it was necessary to rewrite (and thus falsify) the history of the Jewish nation. In Section 26 of *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche traces how the priests

“simplified the psychology of every great event into the idiotic formula ‘obedience to or disobedience of God’” (149), a process that stretched from the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 721 BCE to the Babylonian captivity in 586 BCE. “In plain words,” writes Nietzsche, “a great literary forgery becomes necessary, a ‘sacred book’ is discovered – it is made public with all hieratic pomp, with days of repentance and with lamentation over the long years of ‘sinfulness’” (150). The reference here is to the “discovery,” during the reign of Josiah, of the “book of the law of the LORD given by Moses” (2 Chronicles 34:14) by the High Priest Hilkiah, who stumbled across the “lost” documents while cleaning the temple. This likely forgery, together with the sweeping religious reforms that came in its wake, constitutes a period of vigorous cultural rewriting identified by scholars as the Deuteronomist school, a movement dedicated to preserving Jewish identity in the face of repeated conquest, a looming possibility made all too real by the obliteration of the northern tribes of Israel by the Assyrians. While Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah, forms the centerpiece of this movement, this school not only exercised considerable influence over the Jewish historical record and the prophetic works of Jeremiah, but also engaged in an extensive revision of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the four books that precede it in the Torah. The entire history of the Jewish people, many scholars agree, was thus rewritten to reflect the politics and psychology of this time of conquest.

It is because of this grand falsification that Nietzsche connects the larger philosophical question of truth to the history of Jewish thought. While he admires the cleverness of the Jews for their ability to outmaneuver psychologically the threat of annihilation – “it was on the soil of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an *interesting animal*,” (33) he writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals* – the cost of doing so came at the expense of being able to see reality for itself. That the religious illusions of the priestly class are not to be challenged, he argues, can be seen in the story of Adam and Eve:

Moral: science is the forbidden in itself – it alone is forbidden. Science is the *first* sin, the germ of all sins, *original sin*. This alone constitutes morality. – “Thou shalt *not* know’ – the rest follows. (...) The beginning of the Bible contains the entire psychology of the priest. – The priest knows only one great danger: that is science – the

sound conception of cause and effect. (...) The concept of guilt and punishment, the entire 'moral world-order', was invented in opposition to science – in opposition to the detaching of man from the priest.... Man shall not look around him, he shall look down into himself; he shall not look prudently and cautiously into things in order to learn, he shall not look at all[.] (176–177)

This anti-scientific dimension that Nietzsche identifies as a product of this religious affirmation of willful ignorance should not be overlooked here, since the character of Larry Gopnik is not only Jewish but also a scientist, a man who, in seeking after truth, is endlessly frustrated by the lack of genuine answers provided to him by both the theoretical physics he teaches and the rabbis he visits.

It should be clear from this overview that Nietzsche's criticism of Jewish thought stems not from hatred of the Jews, but from his concern with a particular shift in cultural logic that occurs during a specific period of Jewish history. As Santaniello argues in *Nietzsche and Jewish Culture* (1997), the frequent failure to account for this historical dimension of Nietzsche's critique "has traditionally evoked hasty charges that Nietzsche himself was an anti-Semite," whereas a careful reading of his work shows that "Nietzsche is not attacking contemporary Jewry but priestly Judea" (31). But if Nietzsche's argument hinges on a historical development in ancient Jewish thought, on what basis can we then apply it to an understanding of *A Serious Man*? Such a move is possible because Nietzsche's interest in this period arises from his view that it forms a key moment in the genealogy of modern culture. In the same way that, for instance, classical Greek thought has permeated cultures that transcend its own time and location, so too Nietzsche argues that this particular turn in Jewish thought is a viral meme that now constitutes one of the cornerstones of today's values. The passing of the time of conquest and its adoption by other cultures may have stripped away its initial imperative, but the essential core of the original idea, that the universe is governed by a system of moral reward and punishment, is a notion that persists even in the secular realm. It is through the identification of this "morality meme" that Nietzsche provides the basis for a deeper insight into the central conflict of Larry Gopnik's character in *A Serious Man*, torn as he is between the illusions of a moral order that underlies his Jewish faith on the one hand, and his profession as a scientist, a seeker after reality on the other.

COINS THAT HAVE BECOME METAL

In the oeuvre of the Coen brothers, the work that *A Serious Man* most closely resembles is surely *Barton Fink*. Both films feature a conspicuously Jewish character in the lead role who is beset by a series of obstacles that threaten to destroy him. Both protagonists are plunged into a world of illusions in which their central task is to distinguish reality from a tangled web of lies. Despite these similarities, however, Fink and Gopnik diverge in important ways, with Gopnik's occupation as a scientist, in particular, a crucial counterpoint to Fink's artistic aspirations as a playwright. The contrast between these two different forms of cultural logic guides their responses to the illusions they encounter for, as a playwright, Fink is inherently ensconced in the business of willful fantasy. The film's opening, for instance, shows that Fink's idealistic vision of using the theater to enact social change has blinded him to the limitations of his chosen profession. The inherent contradictions of Fink's vision are tacitly laid bare by the fact that his successful play, *Bare Ruined Choirs*, a celebration of the "common man," is seen by an audience that is composed entirely of a rich and privileged minority, the only "common man" in sight being the stagehand who appears in the opening scene, smoking nonchalantly, reading the newspaper, and clearly unmoved by the play that is supposedly honoring him. Fink struggles against the idea that the success he experiences makes him little more than a high-class pimp for the bourgeois tastes of his upper-class audience. *Barton Fink* is a character study in willful bad faith, with Fink idealistically refusing to acknowledge the limitations of the theater on the one hand, while being unable to bear the cynical realism of the film studios, the true conduit for the culture of the "common man," on the other.

Larry Gopnik, by contrast, is a man whose earnestness and sincerity (unlike Fink's idealistic bad faith) leads him into a world of suffering and pain. Gopnik's upbringing and education has taught him to put his wholehearted trust in the formal logic of things, an approach that only works so long as reality conforms to how he thinks it *ought* to be. This disjunction between Gopnik's expectations and the reality of his life widens as the plot of *A Serious Man* unfolds: thus, despite being a loving husband, his wife Judith ends their marriage and takes up with the execrable Sy Ableman; despite being a loving father, his children take him for granted, seemingly indifferent to their parents' breakup; despite

his passion for his work as a professor, his bid for tenure is shown to be in doubt. Gopnik's emotional need is simple: he craves the stability of certainty, and as such he has ordered his life around a series of emotional and intellectual investments that promise to fulfill this need. When these key parts of his life betray his expectations, Gopnik is thrown into a spiral of pain and doubt that leads him to seek answers in science and religion, two areas that are supposed to be concerned with providing answers to the big questions of life. In different ways, these discourses represent another means for Gopnik to arrange his world in a neatly logical manner so as to bring certainty and stability to his existence. His observances of Jewish tradition order his familial and social life, while science provides him with a rational explanation for the workings of the universe. When his life starts to spin out of control he takes a closer look at the apparent truths in his hand and discovers, as Nietzsche puts it, that what he thought was valuable, what he thought was the truth, consists merely of "metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" (47).

The irony of Gopnik's situation is that the difficult truths he must confront are precisely those he has been given the tools to handle – like the teacher in Ecclesiastes, wisdom is both the source of and the solution to the dilemma that confronts him. Gopnik's problem is that he views these tools as purely theoretical, divorced from the messy complexity of reality, and as such they remain appealingly fresh and uncomplicated for him only because of their lack of practical application. When the viewer first witnesses Gopnik in the classroom, for instance, he is enthusiastically intoning to a group of bored students his admiration for the famous thought experiment known as Schrödinger's cat, in which the great Austrian quantum physicist demonstrates how reality remains undetermined and uncertain until necessity is forced upon it. "This part is exciting," exclaims Gopnik, enthused by the formal beauty of Schrödinger's explanation. The fascination of Schrödinger's cat, for scientists and laymen alike, derives from the fact that it challenges the principle of contradiction at the heart of classical, Aristotelian logic. The thought experiment seems to court absurdity by showing, against the expectations of all previous logic, that two mutually exclusive states of affairs can exist and not exist at the same time, and yet it does so by using logic against its own former assumptions. In so doing,

science seems to negate its very existence – and yet it continues to exist, having somehow survived the contradiction that threatens to eliminate it. The sheer audacity and brilliance of Schrödinger’s justification of such a paradox through rational means is, from an intellectual point of view, breathtaking.

Yet for all his wide-eyed admiration of the contradictions of the physical universe, Gopnik only likes these problems when they are at arm’s length, when he can deal with them as mathematical abstractions rather than as a complex and disturbing reality. Immediately following the lecture, for instance, Gopnik returns to his office where he receives a visit from Clive, a Korean student who wishes to speak to him about the “unjust test results” he received in Gopnik’s class. During this conversation, Clive insists that he has understood the material covered in class. “If I receive failing grade I lose my scholarship, and feel shame,” he tells Gopnik, “I understand the physics. I understand the dead cat.” Whether or not Clive comprehends the physics is uncertain, but what is clear is that he has in fact grasped the basic logic of Schrödinger’s paradox – not at the mathematical level, but at the moral level, for upon Clive’s departure Gopnik discovers an envelope containing several one-hundred dollar bills. When Gopnik confronts Clive at a subsequent meeting, he lapses back into the kind of outmoded classical logic that Schrödinger helped to transcend:

Clive: I didn’t leave anything. I’m not missing anything. I know where everything is.

Gopnik: Well... then, Clive, where did this come from? This is here, isn’t it?

Clive: Yes, sir. That is there.

Gopnik: This is not nothing, this is something.

Clive: Yes sir. That is something. What is it?

Gopnik: You know what it is! You know what it is! I believe. And you know I can’t keep it, Clive.

Clive: Of course, sir.

Gopnik: I’ll have to pass it on to Professor Finkle, along with my suspicions about where it came from. Actions have consequences.

Clive: Yes. Often.

Gopnik: Always! Actions always have consequences! In this office, actions have consequences!

Clive: Yes sir.

Gopnik: Not just physics. Morally.

Clive: Yes.

Gopnik: And we both know about your actions.

Clive: No sir. I know about my actions.

Gopnik: I can interpret, Clive. I know what you meant me to understand.

[...]

Clive: Mere... surmise. Sir. Very uncertain.

In this crucial scene, Clive is not being portrayed as stupid – on the contrary, he demonstrates a solid grasp of both the logical paradox of Schrödinger’s cat (as applied to the bribe) and a scientific insistence on empirical proof regarding his actions and motives, dismissing anything that cannot be painstakingly proven as “mere surmise.” Clive’s Korean background is strategically chosen here because it makes him tone-deaf to the moral illusions that Gopnik is trying desperately to rationalize. This conversation forms one of Gopnik’s first steps toward the unsettling realization that morality is not a code embedded in the universe, an ironclad set of rules before which he, as a virtuous man, is helplessly bound, but instead constitutes a set of practices that are unavoidably distorted by desires and prejudices. Far from the objective arbiter he once imagined himself to be, Gopnik is forced by his confrontations with Clive (and later, Clive’s father) to face the fact that, as a professor, he is the *archon*, the rabbi or priest in whom the power of success or failure is invested, an authority he simultaneously embraces and disavows.

The incident with Clive is introduced as an implicit parallel to Gopnik’s encounters with the rabbis, the gatekeepers of his religious faith. Just as Clive comes to him protesting against “unjust test results,” so too Gopnik goes to the rabbis to protest the “injustice” of what is happening in his life. This analogy is further reinforced by the scriptural precedent of God using painful circumstances as a “test of faith” – as numerous critics and reviewers of *A Serious Man* have noted, Gopnik’s tribulations resemble the story of Job. Gopnik’s increasing frustration with the rabbis, who dance around his questions without providing any satisfactory answers, parallels the contradictions of Gopnik’s own conversation with Clive. Just as Clive is told that he is responsible for his poor test results, so too Gopnik is blamed by the rabbis for his problems. The recommendation that he remain strong in his faith contains a hidden rebuke, for it implies that Gopnik has, in some way, been unfaithful to it. Rabbi Nachtner’s unsettlingly cheerful pronouncement that “Hashem doesn’t owe us anything,” but rather that “the obligation runs the other way,” shows his priestly logic at its most cunning, for by shifting all responsibility away from himself the rabbi understands that neither he nor his religion can be held accountable for

anything. The arbitrariness of the universe – epitomized by Gopnik’s poignant question as to why God “make[s] us feel the questions if he’s not going to give us any answers?” – is overcoded in this way by an internalized order of morality that places the entire onus for guilt on the subject in question. This moral logic reduces Gopnik’s options down to two choices: the unsavory conclusion that the universe is godless and chaotic, devoid of meaning and consequence, or that God is just, so that he, Gopnik, must search his heart to discover the source of the righteous anger being directed at him. Nietzsche’s contention that the internalization of this moral lie is a learned cultural condition rather than a natural response is confirmed in *A Serious Man* by the presence of Clive who, while he tells Gopnik that he feels “shame,” clearly does not experience a similar sense of moral guilt.

Lifting the veil of illusion is not, therefore, a straightforward matter of revealing the truth in all its nakedness. An illusion can be a useful tool for affirmation, self-preservation, or even, as in this instance, for the sake of critique – it should not be forgotten, after all, that *A Serious Man* is itself a fiction, that the Coen brothers are in the business of creating cinematic illusions. *A Serious Man* turns fiction against itself, not for the sake of abolishing it, but in order, if I may push the religious metaphor, to test the underlying faith of the stories it encounters. The film’s various narratives, including the main plot, all have unsatisfactory endings that create more questions than they solve. Bad faith comes into play in these situations not from the contradictions left open by the stories, but from interpretations of these stories that try to shield their inherent paradoxes from critical thought. The attempt to foreclose such close inspection is particularly visible in the behavior of the rabbis, from Rabbi Scott’s exhortation for Gopnik to “look at the parking lot” with fresh eyes, to Rabbi Nachtner’s hilarious story of the Jewish dentist who, after chasing desperately after further messages from God, eventually finds happiness in complacency, to Rabbi Marshak’s banal advice to Danny Gopnik to “be a good boy.” If this film is a retelling of the story of Job, it does so from the inside-out, for in the scriptures it is Job’s friends who, in contrast to the rabbis, urge him to *abandon* his faith, not adhere blindly to it. Nonetheless, the conclusion found in the book of Job is instructive, for Job, crying out to God for an answer, receives a lengthy but evasive reply. “Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him?” asks God, listing the vast powers he wields that cause Job’s frail existence to

pale by comparison (Job 40:2). The central point of God's reply is that Job must bow before his will and obey without question, ceasing any attempt to understand the universe, the complexity of which Job cannot possibly grasp. The rhetorical questions with which God bombards Job thus constitute a refusal to be held accountable, an evasive answer that Job accepts in a way that separates him from Gopnik, who is deeply dissatisfied by the rabbis' consensus that the troubles he is facing constitute a divine "mystery."

What defies logic about the "test of faith" in the scriptures are the logical contradictions created by the repeated inscrutability of God. The reader is told from the outset, for instance, that Job is a good and faithful man. Rather than test the faith of someone whose belief is wavering, God's choice of Job, a rigorously faithful servant, appears puzzling and arbitrary. God seems to pick on Job simply because he has the immense power to do so, to prove that he, as a deity, is not accountable to anyone, a position that directly contradicts his claim to be a just and omniscient deity. The other famous "test of faith" in the scriptures, in which Abraham is told to sacrifice his son Isaac, is briefly referred to in *A Serious Man* when the camera sweeps over a copy of Caravaggio's painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1603) in Rabbi Marshak's office. The allusion sets up Danny Gopnik as a parallel to Isaac, who is unexpectedly reprieved, in this instance, not by grace, but by Grace Slick, the lead singer of Jefferson Airplane, the band for which Marshak shows an unexpected appreciation. So perplexing is God's decision to test the faith of Abraham that the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard dedicates an entire book, *Fear and Trembling* (1843), to analyzing his predicament. Abraham, Kierkegaard points out, is faced with an impossible dilemma, for no matter what choice he makes he will lose either his faith in God or his beloved son. Unable to discover a rational moral in this story, Kierkegaard instead advocates taking a "leap of faith," placing blind trust in the superior, impenetrable motives of God. The central ambiguity of the "test of faith," therefore, comes from the way in which it subverts the moral idea that reward and punishment are determined by the extent of one's faithfulness. For while Job and Abraham are rewarded in the end, the source of their suffering originates from a cruel and, as the outcome of the test demonstrates, unnecessary subjection of themselves to pain and humiliation. It is a peculiar kind of savior that rescues his people from the danger he himself has created.

Yet it is precisely the unsatisfactory quality of these tales, their refusal to resolve the dilemma at their core into a clear and unambiguous moral message, which allows them to be used as critical tools, for the inherent paradox they represent provides a key that can unlock the illusion of the “morality meme.” Like coins passed unexamined from hand to hand, these stories maintain their currency only if they are not inspected too closely. The Coen brothers carefully replicate this impression in the film’s prologue, where they present a seemingly unconnected story about a *dybbuk*, an evil spirit from Jewish folklore. In this tale, a man, Velvel, returns home to his wife, Dora, telling her that on his way home he was helped by Treitle Groshkover, an old man whom he has invited to the house. Dora is suspicious of this story, telling her husband that Groshkover is dead, and that the person he saw must have been a *dybbuk*. When Groshkover refuses her offer of soup, Dora takes this as a confirmation of her suspicions and stabs the old man through the heart. For a moment, there is no sign of blood, and Dora is triumphant, but soon enough blood trickles through his shirt, and the old man, offended, stumbles out into the snow. The story is deliberately left open-ended, forever hanging on Groshkover’s unanswered question: “I ask you, Velvel, as a rational man: which of us is possessed?” Dora’s assault on Groshkover is a stubborn adherence to her superstitious illusions in the face of empirical evidence, the kind of mystical thinking that the film sets out to confront. Indeed, the prologue can be read as a microcosm of the film’s main plot, mirroring it in several important ways. In Gopnik’s story, for instance, it is Sy Ableman who parallels Groshkover, with Gopnik’s car accident echoing the breakdown of Velvel’s cart. Just as Dora speculates that an evil spirit entered Groshkover’s body when the *shiva* being observed over his body was broken for several minutes, so too Sy Ableman’s *shiva* is interrupted by the policemen looking for Arthur. Finally, there is the film’s ambiguous ending, which leaves the viewer wondering: is the tornado the incarnation of Sy Ableman as an avenging *dybbuk*? Is it the LORD assuming the same form he took in the Book of Job? Or is it a reference to the famous passage in Hosea 8:7 which proclaims that “they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind”? Or, speaking “as a rational man,” could it simply be that the whirlwind has no moral significance whatsoever, that it is merely a phenomenon of nature that has nothing to do with whether or not Gopnik is a good man?

JEWISH ENLIGHTENMENT: THE CULTURAL “GET”

While *A Serious Man* connects the “morality meme” most obviously to the ongoing impact it has had on Jewish culture, its power and ability to insert itself into other areas of culture is illustrated in the film by Gopnik’s relationship to science. Gopnik unconsciously adopts an attitude toward science that replicates his religious views, as evidenced in his words to Clive:

But... you... you can’t really understand the physics without understanding the math. The math tells how it really works. That’s the real thing; the stories I give you in class are just illustrative; they’re like, fables, say, to help give you a picture. An imperfect model. I mean – even I don’t understand the dead cat. The math is how it really works.

Gopnik here shifts Schrödinger’s cat from being a scientific explanation of the physical world into being a moral “fable,” an implicit parallel to the religious wisdom contained in the stories of Abraham or Job. The role of God is filled, in Gopnik’s analogy, by mathematics, to whose logical necessities one must be faithful – remembering that Clive’s failure to adhere to this principle is his chief transgression.

A clearly exasperated Gopnik again overcodes science with morality in the scene where he lectures on the Uncertainty Principle: “The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can’t ever really know what’s going on. So it shouldn’t bother you. Not being able to figure anything out. Although you will be responsible for this on the mid-term.” When the students clear out of the hall, leaving only the ghost of Sy Ableman in a prayer shawl and yarmulke, the viewer quickly realizes that this is a dream sequence. Ableman’s return from death makes him a *dybbuk*, like Groshkover in the film’s prelude, although the kind of *dybbuk* that appears in *A Serious Man* is less an evil spirit than a teller of unwanted and bitter truths. For all his unctuous charisma, Ableman is at least capable, unlike Gopnik, of seeing the reality of things, cutting through the latter’s misplaced faith. “I’ll concede that it’s subtle. It’s clever,” he admits of the Uncertainty Principle. “But at the end of the day, is it convincing?” When Gopnik nervously assures him that it’s “a proof. It’s mathematics,” Ableman advances menacingly and reminds Gopnik that mathematics is “the art of the possible,” not the necessary. We are operating under an illusion, implies Ableman, when we act according to

how the world *ought* be rather than how it really is. Mathematics only describes things, it does not determine them.

This tension between science and religion is the point at which the secular outlook of the Coen brothers also breaks with certain aspects of Jewish culture. The historical rise of a Jewish secular identity – Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment – since the eighteenth century provides a crucial context for this worldview, in large part because it addresses that sometimes difficult line between rejecting one’s culture altogether and objecting critically to a specific aspect of it. This matter becomes even more complicated when one considers the startling insight that Nietzsche provides into the origins of anti-Semitism, for the “morality meme,” to which Nietzsche gives his own label of “*ressentiment*” in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, is identified in that book, in a surprising twist, as the original source of anti-Semitic logic:

Here a word in repudiation of attempts that have lately been made to seek the origin of justice in quite a different sphere – namely in that of *ressentiment*. To the psychologists first of all, presuming they would like to study *ressentiment* close up for once, I would say: this plant blooms best today among anarchists and anti-Semites – where it has always bloomed, in hidden places, like the violet, though with a different odor. And as like must always produce like, it causes us no surprise to see a repetition in such circles of attempts often made before (...) to sanctify *revenge* under the name of *justice* – as if justice were at bottom merely a further development of the feeling of being aggrieved – and to rehabilitate not only revenge but all *reactive* affects in general. (73–74)

In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche outlines in greater detail how the “morality meme” initially emerges with the Deuteronomists and is later appropriated by Christianity. Nietzsche argues that it is St Paul – the true Anti-Christ, in his opinion – who, in direct contradiction to Christ’s teachings, places a rejuvenated version of the “morality meme” at the center of Christianity. Christianity provides a template for the insidious way in which this cultural meme has replicated itself throughout the centuries. Christianity is born, Nietzsche points out, from a form of Jewish logic that is used, in the same gesture, to renounce its own Jewish origins. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female,” writes Paul in Galatians 3:28, “for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” There is thus a perverse irony in the fact that the pervasive anti-Semitism Nietzsche sees amongst his German con-

temporaries, especially the spirit of seething injustice and outrage that seems to motivate its hatred, is the unconscious descendant of a particular strand of Jewish thought.

Whereas Nietzsche regularly compares the effects of the “morality meme” to a poison, Jacques Derrida, in his book *Archive Fever* (1995), describes the difficulties of dealing with one’s cultural past as being similar to an illness: the *mal d’archive* or “archive fever.” The cultural dilemma faced by Derrida, as a secular Jew, closely resembles the ambiguities presented by the Coen brothers in *A Serious Man* – in the course of the book, for instance, Derrida talks of his personal struggle over whether or not his sons should be circumcised. Such issues are presented within a broader meditation on the difficulties of cultural memory that begins with the Greeks (in an etymology of the word “archive” back to *archon*, the Greek word for “ruler”) and dovetails into Derrida’s reflections on Sigmund Freud, another secular Jew, and Yosef H. Yerushalmi, whose book *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1991) examines Freud’s ambivalent relationship to his Jewish heritage. Derrida discerns a crucial split between Judaism and Jewishness in Yerushalmi’s work, in which the philosophical outlook of Jewishness is preserved as a cultural mindset even when the religious aspect of Judaism is rejected:

Yerushalmi clearly marks that if Judaism is terminable, Jewishness is interminable. It can survive Judaism. It can survive it as a heritage, which is to say, in a sense, *not without archive*, even if this archive should remain without substrate and without actuality. (...) And this essence of Jewishness should not be mistaken as merging with Judaism, or with religion, or even with the belief in God. Now the Jewishness that does not await the future is precisely the waiting for the future, the opening of a relation to the future, the experience of the future. This is what would be proper to the “Jew”[.] (72)

There is a poignant ambivalence that pervades this secular vision of Jewishness explored by Derrida in *Archive Fever*, one that always pulls in multiple directions at once: it looks to the future, as Yerushalmi claims, but it does so while remembering the past, although without following that past slavishly. The depth of this ambiguity is epitomized by Derrida’s title, for the French term *mal d’archive* means not only “archive fever,” but also has the sense that this feeling of illness is caused by a profound craving. “Listening to the French idiom,” writes Derrida, “and in it the

attribute *en mal de*, to be *en mal d'archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun *mal* might name. It is to burn with passion" (91). The cultural archive oppresses when it is too close, stifling with its rituals and traditions, but when it withdraws we are left equally disturbed by its absence and thus long, as Derrida points out, for its return.

The elegant solution the Coen brothers find to solve this dilemma in *A Serious Man* might be described as a cultural "get." In *A Serious Man*, Judith Gopnik seeks a specific kind of divorce from her husband – a "get," which would allow her to marry Sy Ableman while remaining within the Jewish faith. In the scriptures, similarly, the religious covenant between God and the Jews is repeatedly compared to a marriage. Consistent with the Deuteronomist logic of faithfulness to God, the perceived violations of this covenant are portrayed as equivalent to adultery, from Ezekiel's extended metaphor of Israel as a "harlot" (Ezekiel 16:15) to Hosea's comparison of the Jews to his own treacherous wife (Hosea 1:2). Echoing this metaphor, therefore, it might be said that the Coen brothers have, as it were, issued a "get" to Judaism: the covenant is broken, the nomological grip of the archive is prised open. This shift is a movement away from the religious toward the scientific, rejecting as it does Rabbi Scott's *a priori* insistence upon seeing all "things as expressions of God's will." It should be clear from the tone of *A Serious Man* that this cultural "get" does not stem from a hatred or rejection by the Coen brothers of their Jewishness. Love is least free when it is bound by a system of covenants and moral rewards. It is only when the Coens are freed from the covenant, when they are allowed to choose to affirm their Jewishness of their own accord, that the true measure of their passion for it can be felt. It is a love that allows them to return to their Jewish origins freed from obligation, having learned that to accept the world as an amoral phenomenon is the only way to break the poisonous cycle of the "morality meme."

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